Preface

[To the book: *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*, by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford (London: BCA/Penguin, 1991)]

When we began this book we intended simply to gather together the stories and images of goddesses as they were expressed in different cultures, from the first sculpted figures of the Palaeolithic era in 20,000 BC\* down to contemporary pictures of the Virgin Mary. This seemed worth doing because one way in which humans apprehend their own being is by making it visible in the images of their goddesses and gods. But in the course of this research we discovered such surprising similarities and parallels in all the goddess myths of apparently unrelated cultures that we concluded that there had been a continuous transmission of images throughout history. This continuity is so striking that we feel entitled to talk of ‘the myth of the goddess’, since the underlying vision expressed in all the variety of goddess images is constant: the vision of life as a living unity.

The Mother Goddess, wherever she is found, is an image that inspires and focuses a perception of the universe as an organic, alive and sacred whole, in which humanity, the Earth and all life on Earth participate as ‘her children’. Everything is woven together in one cosmic web, where all orders of manifest and unmanifest life are related, because all share in the sanctity of the original source.

However, it was evident that in our present age the goddess myth is nowhere to be found. Of course, in the Catholic version of Christianity Mary, ‘the Virgin’, ‘Queen of Heaven’, is clothed in all the old goddess images – except that, significantly, she is not ‘Queen of Earth’. The Earth used to have, as it were, a goddess to call her own, because the Earth and all creation were of the same substance as the Goddess. Earth was her epiphany: the divine was immanent as creation. Our mythic image of Earth has lost this dimension.

So we set out to discover what had happened to the goddess image, how and when it disappeared, and what were the implications of this loss. Since mythic images implicitly govern a culture, what did this tell us about a particular culture – such as our own – that either did not have or did not acknowledge a mythic image of the feminine principle? It began to seem no coincidence that ours is the age above all others that has desacralized Nature: generally speaking, the Earth is no longer instinctively experienced as a living being as in earlier times, or so it would seem from the evidence of pollution (itself a term that originally meant the profaning of what was sacred). And now is also the time when the whole body of the Earth is threatened in a way unique to the history of the planet.

Consequently, the second aim of this book became to explore the way in which the goddess myth was lost; when, where and how the images of ‘the god’ arose, and how goddess and god related to each other in earlier cultures and times. It soon became clear that, from Babylonian mythology onwards (*c.* 2000 BC), the Goddess became almost exclusively associated with ‘Nature’ as the chaotic force to be mastered , and the God took the role of conquering or ordering nature from his counterpole of ‘Spirit’. Yet this opposition had not previously existed, so it needed to be placed in the context of the evolution of consciousness. One way of understanding this process is to view it as the progressive withdrawal of participation from nature, which makes possible an increasing

\* The currently accepted way of referencing early dates is 20, 000 BCE (rather than BC).

independence of natural phenomena and a gradual transference of ‘nature’s life’ into humanity. This is how it seems to be that Humanity and Nature become polarized. But while this polarization can be seen to be a first stage in this process – perhaps even an inevitable one – it does not constitute an absolute description of the two terms that were once one. Yet so much are we still living with the thought structures initiated in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages that we were obliged continually to remind ourselves that this was not intrinsic to the way in which we had to reflect upon these terms.

It came, then, as a surprise to discover the extent to which our Judaeo-Christian religion or mythology (depending on the point of view) had inherited the paradigm images of Babylonian mythology, particularly the opposition between Creative Spirit and Chaotic Nature, and also the habit of thinking in oppositions generally. We find this, for instance, in the common assumption that the spiritual and the physical worlds are different in kind, an assumption that, unreflectively held, separates mind from matter, soul from body, thinking from feeling, intellect from intuition and reason from instinct. When, in addition, the ‘spiritual’ pole of these dualisms is valued as ‘higher’ than the ‘physical’ pole, then the two terms fall into an opposition that is almost impossible to reunite without dissolving both terms.

We concluded that, for the last 4,000 years, the feminine principle, which manifests in mythological history as ‘the goddess’ and in cultural history as the values placed upon spontaneity, feeling, instinct and intuition, had been lost as a valid expression of the sanctity and unity of life. In Judaeo-Christian mythology there is now, formally, no feminine dimension of the divine, since our particular culture is structured in the image of a masculine god who is beyond creation, ordering it from without; he is not within creation, as were the mother goddesses before him. This results, inevitably, in an imbalance of the masculine and feminine principles, which has fundamental implications for how we create our world and live in it.

We also found that even when the goddess myth was debased and devalued, it did not go away, but continued to exist in disguise – in images that were prevented from expressing themselves vitally and spontaneously, particularly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In Greek mythology, for example, Zeus ‘married’ the old mother goddesses, one after the other, and they continued to rule the provinces of childbirth, fertility or spiritual transformation in their own right, even though they were finally answerable to the Father God himself. But in Hebrew mythology the goddess went, so to speak, underground. She was hidden in the chaotic dragons of Leviathan and Behemoth, whose destruction was never complete, or in the ineluctable appeal of the forbidden Canaanite goddess Astarte, or, more abstractly, in the feminine personification of Yahweh’s ‘wisdom’ – Sophia – and his ‘presence’ – the Shekhinah. Eve, though human and cursed, was given by Adam the displaced name of the mother goddess of old – ‘the Mother of All Living’ – though with fatally new and limited meaning. The Virgin Mary, as the ‘second Eve’ – who has been gathering importance over the centuries in answer, it must be, to some unfulfilled need of many people – was finally declared ‘Assumed into Heaven, Body and Soul’ as Queen only in the 1950s.

In all these instances, as we hope to show, the myth of the goddess continued to act on the prevailing world view of the time. However, since this myth was contrary to formal doctrine, its action had to be implicit and indirect in the manner of any less-than-fully conscious attitude, which meant that its unacknowledged but persistent presence often distorted even the finest expressions of the prevailing myth of the god. It seemed clear that the feminine principle was an aspect of human consciousness that could not and should not be eradicated. Consequently, it needed to be brought back into consciousness and restored to full complementarity with the masculine principle, if we were to achieve a harmonious balance between these two essential ways of experiencing life.

So where was the goddess myth now? Turning then to the discoveries of the ‘new’ sciences, it appeared, astonishingly, as if the old goddess myth were re-emerging in a new form, not as a personalized image of a female deity, but as what that image represented: a vision of life as a sacred whole in which all life participated in mutual relationship, and where all participants were dynamically ‘alive’. For, beginning with Heisenberg and Einstein, physicists were claiming that in subatomic physics the universe could be understood only as a unity, that this unity was expressed in patterns of relationship, and that the observer was necessarily included in the act of observation. Characteristically, these conclusions were themselves expressed in many of the images that belonged to the old goddess myth. The web of space and time that the mother goddess once spun from her eternal womb – from Neolithic goddess figures buried with spindle whorls, through the Greek spinners of destiny, down to Mary – had become the ‘cosmic web’ in which all life was related. All the mother goddesses were born from the sea – from the Sumerian Nammu, the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, down to the Christian Mary (whose name in Latin means sea). Now this image had come back into the imagination as the ‘ocean of energy’ of the ‘Implicate Order’.

From a mythological perspective, the goddess myth can also be seen in the attempts of many human beings to live in a new way, allowing their feeling of participation with the Earth as a whole to affect how they think about it and act towards it, aware of the urgent need to comprehend the world as a unity. Einstein is the spokesman for this need: ‘With the splitting of the atom everything has changed save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift towards unparalleled disaster.’

But the predominant mythic image of the age – which could be characterized as ‘the god without the goddess’ – continues to support the very oppositional and mechanistic paradigm that the lastest scientific discoveries are refuting. This means that two essential aspects of the human mind are out of accord with each other. It may seem a lot to claim that mythic images are so important to all areas of human experience, but the discoveries of Depth Psychology have shown how radically we are influenced and motivated by impulses below the threshold of consciousness, both in our personal and in our collective life as members of the human race. We cannot, then, afford to be indifferent to the prevailing climate of thought. It would seem necessary to make the attempt to move beyond our mythological inheritance in the same way that we try to gain some perspective on our individual inheritance – our specific family, tribe and country.

One way of bringing the myth of the goddess back into consciousness is to tell again the stories people have told down the millennia, and to follow the continuous chain of images through different cultures from 20,000 BC onwards, gathering them all together so that their underlying unity can appear. Then this neglected, devalued but apparently unquenchable tradition may speak for itself. This we have tried to do, in the hope that the vision of life as a sacred whole, which at its finest the goddess myth embodies, might be brought into relation with the god myth, and so contribute to the new mode of thinking for which Einstein calls.

We took a decision to focus on the Western tradition and so we have not attempted to tell the stories of India, Africa and the Far East. This is obviously a limitation, but the book is long enough already! Perhaps readers will see parallels and points of contrast that would contribute to a truly universal theme.

One word about myth. Myth, as the foremost exponent of mythology, Joseph Campbell, has written, is a dream everyone has, just as everyone also dreams her or his own personal myths: ‘Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream’:

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man [*sic*] have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Myths are the stories of the human race that we dream onwards. In fact, the most we can do, according to Jung, is ‘to dream the dream onwards and give it a modern dress.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Back in the Bronze Age a union of the mythic images of the feminine and the masculine principles was symbolized in the ‘sacred marriage’ of the goddess and the god, a ritual ceremony that was believed to assist the regeneration of nature. With the greater self-consciousness of 4,000 years later, may it not be possible to re-create in the human imagination the same kind of insights that once were enacted in unconscious participation with the same purpose: the renewal of creative life? What would the modern dress of this ancient dream be? With the restoration of the feminine to a complementary relation with the masculine, might there then be the possibility of a new mythology of the universe as one harmonious living whole? Nature and Spirit, after the many millennia of their separation, newly embraced as one and the same?

1. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9:1, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious,* para. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)